

ARMING THE SOVIETS

The Forgotten Story of the Auburn Lend-Lease Depot

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There are many overlooked stories from World War II, but few have vanished as completely from the collective consciousness as the story of the huge Lend-Lease Depot in Auburn. The ports of Seattle, Tacoma, and Portland played a key role in supplying our troops while they were fighting in the Pacific, but they were also important in supplying Lend-Lease materiel to our allies, primarily the Soviet Union.

The Lend-Lease program was initially an arrangement approved by Congress in 1941 whereby the United States supplied military equipment and armaments to the United Kingdom and its allies. The program was originally intended as a loan in return for the use of British-owned military bases before the United States had entered World War II. When Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, President Roosevelt pledged that the United States "would give all possible aid to Soviet Russia in its defense against Nazi Germany." Eventually, the Lend-Lease Act was extended to provide assistance to any country fighting against the Axis powers. The largest recipients, however, were Britain and the Soviet Union, with the Soviets receiving over \$10 billion in aid by the end of the war.

By early 1943 supplies had begun to stack up at all three Pacific Northwest ports, and some system was urgently needed to prevent logistical chaos. It was at this point that the United States government decided to construct in Auburn the largest of the nation's 10 "holding and reconsignment points." The other holding and reconsignment (H&R) points had been built at Elmira, New York; Lathrop, California; Marietta, Pennsylvania; Montgomery, Alabama; Pasco, Washington; Richmond, Virginia; Shreveport, Louisiana; Voorheesville, New York; and Yermo, California.

According to the army's official history of the Transportation Corps, H&R points were meant to serve "as reservoirs where equipment and supplies that could not be promptly moved overseas were held until they were called to the ports." The Lend-Lease Act of March 1941 gave added impetus to the movement to build such facilities because it implied that a tremendous volume of supplies would move through American ports. Since most Lend-Lease supplies went to Great Britain at the outset of the war, the earliest of these facilities were built near the East Coast. Just a few days prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Transportation Division had recommended that H&R points be built in California to back up the ports of San Francisco and Los Angeles, and in Washington to support the ports on Puget Sound as well as Portland, Oregon. This plan was approved, and on December 31, 1941, the chief of engineers was told to begin selection of sites immediately.

Initially, the general staff was worried about Japanese bombardment of the West Coast, so sites were selected away from the seaboard. The initial West Coast H&R points were built at Yermo and Pasco. The point at Yermo turned out to be unsatisfactory because of its isolation and climate, which made it difficult to attract workers. In a probable attempt to deal with these issues, another H&R point was built at Lathrop, California, just south of Stockton. The Auburn H&R point was likely an analogous effort to deal with the distances separating Pasco from the major Pacific Northwest ports.

A government-issued report on the Transportation Corps noted that the buildings at these sites were constructed according to a standard plan:

One story, 960 feet long and 180 feet wide, with platforms for loading and unloading rail cars running the full length of each side and a platform for handling truck freight at one end. The open storage areas were provided with adequate tracks so that freight could be unloaded from cars with crawler or railroad cranes and placed in the space it was to occupy without additional handling.

Except for Yermo, a huge desert location east of Barstow, California, the sites averaged about 600 acres. No provisions were made for the storage of refrigerated cargo or for storage of ammunition and explosives. Therefore, special army backup storage facilities were built for export ammunition and explosives, including facilities at Marysville, Washington, and Beaver, Oregon, on the Columbia River. In addition, special army piers were designated for shipment of such cargo, including facilities at Mukilteo, Washington, and Beaver.

Since War Department funds were not available when construction of the H&R points began, Lend-Lease funds provided most of the money for these projects. By February 1944, \$43 million in Lend-Lease funds had been consumed for this purpose.

The initial impetus for building the H&R points was to facilitate shipment of Lend-Lease cargo. However, a decision was ultimately made that general army cargo bound for overseas destinations could also be stored there. A further policy decision dictated that such points be used only to temporarily house freight designated for oversea shipment and not for general storage.

During the period 1942-45, the 10 holding and reconsignment points received shipments equal to approximately 293,000 carloads—about 8,790,000 short tons. The Transportation Corps did its best to make sure the H&R points never became clogged with excess cargo. They attempted to keep about 50 percent of the storage space available for emergency shipments. As an example of their efforts, during fiscal year 1945 the amount of freight on hand more than 60 days dropped from 11,000 to 3,500 carloads.

In June 1943 the government obtained land a few miles southwest of Auburn. The area involved 72 tracts, totaling 600 acres. Civilian contractors, working under army engineers, moved in July to begin construction. Storage began in mid October.

By October stories began to appear in the *Tacoma News Tribune* and the *Auburn Globe-News* about the huge new depot. The depot contained 12 large warehouses, providing 2 million square feet of closed storage. The frame construction buildings had concrete floors and foundations. Six were heated. Railway tracks and loading platforms flanked the length of each warehouse. The site encompassed 44 acres of covered storage facilities and included 41 miles of railroad tracks, with 30 sets of rails laid parallel in one sector. According to the November 24,

1943, *Globe-News*, the warehouses would be joined by "shops, roundhouses, a mess hall, fire station, dispensary, cafeteria, bachelor officers' quarters and two administration buildings."

The site was two and a half miles long by half a mile wide. Auburn was chosen for the project because of the junction there of transcontinental railway lines and the proximity to the deepwater ports of Seattle and Tacoma. Portland was also listed as a shipment point for supplies from the warehouses. In fact, Portland became the primary port of choice for shipment of Lend-Lease materiel to Russia. Since Russia was officially neutral in the Pacific war, goods could travel between the United States and Russia safely as long as they were carried on Russian flagships. Therefore, all Lend-Lease supplies to Russia across the Pacific had to travel on Russian ships.

According to Robert H. Jones in *The Roads to Russia*, almost half of all Lend-Lease supplies to Russia were shipped through West Coast ports, and Portland, along with the smaller Columbia River ports of Longview, Kalama, and Vancouver, Washington, played the major role. The *Oregonian*, in a July 6, 1969, feature story, explained that the government did not want the Russians "snooping around their naval yards, and the Columbia River had no such installations." The same article shows that before, during, and after World War II, 668 Russian ships called at Columbia River ports and transported 4.2 million tons of goods valued at over \$2.1 billion. That is about 20 percent of the total of \$10 billion in Lend-Lease goods sent to the Soviet Union during the war.

At the beginning of the war the Soviets had a shortage of ships, a situation the United States soon remedied. According to Jones, by June 30, 1942, we had transferred 53 cargo vessels and six tankers to the Russians for the North Pacific run. North Pacific is a very general term, by the way. Although the majority of ships sailed from the Pacific Northwest to Vladivostok, many ships took the perilous voyage through the Arctic Ocean across the top of Russia. Jones supplies the following numbers for such voyages:

1942.....23 ships
1943.....32 ships
1944.....34 ships
1945.....31 ships

Such trips could only be made during a few months of the year and only with the help of a fleet of icebreakers. The primary purpose of such voyages appears to have been providing supplies for the Siberian airfields used by the Alaska-Siberia air route, through which the United States sent 7,925 aircraft from Great Falls, Montana, to Russia.

Colonel W. R. Hazelrigg, officer in charge of depot operations, said in a statement on October 23, 1943, that the center should relieve congestion at ports of embarkation and in railroad yards throughout the country. He added that the depot was scheduled for full operation by January 15, 1944. Woodworth & Company of Tacoma employed as many as 1,200 men on the construction project at an estimated cost of \$11million. Employment of 2,000 civilians was expected once the project was completed—this, in a community with a prewar population of 4,000. A private housing project had already been built and another federal project was on the way.

On November 24, 1943, the *Auburn Globe-News* reported Colonel Hazelrigg's invitation for everyone to attend the dedication ceremony for the point: "The sky will be dotted with planes simulating strafing and bombing—army jeeps and amphibians and various types of combat

equipment will be here in numbers. It will be a great military display such as this city has never seen before, one in keeping with the dedication of the nation's largest holding and reconsignment point, through which will pass provisions for the Allied nations." The colonel went on to say that after December 1, 1943, the facility would be closed to the public.

The December 2, 1943, *News Tribune* reported on the new facility's dedication ceremony, which took place that day:

The dedication drew the most dazzling assemblage of military and civilian dignitaries this city has ever seen to witness the driving of the golden spike which formally tied together the four transcontinental railroads serving this huge project. Brigadier General Robert H. Wylie, assistant chief of transportation, War Department, Washington, D.C., deftly drove the golden spike clear to the heel of the rail with one solid blow as the crowd of 3,000 cheered.

The crowd included schoolchildren and business proprietors. Junior and senior high schools closed in the morning at 9:15 so students could attend, and the Auburn Chamber of Commerce announced that places of business would close from 9:30 to 11:00. An army band from Seattle played the national anthems of Great Britain, Russia, China, and the United States. Lend-Lease allies were represented by the following Seattle-based dignitaries: Harold C. Sean, British Consul; I.M. Lomakin, Soviet Consul; and Kiang Yi-Seng, Chinese Consul.

According to the December 1, 1943, *Auburn Globe-News*, Colonel L.M. Nicolson, director of storage, Office of Defense Transportation, spoke at the ceremony about the history of the project and the depot's operating capacity, and noted, "This new facility will play a significant role in the battle of the Pacific and will afford substantial relief to the overburdened railroad terminal and public storage facilities in the Puget Sound area."

Once the dedication ceremony was over, the depot seemed to fade from the public eye, probably due to wartime censorship regulations. Local newspapers only rarely made some reference to the holding and reconsignment point, or simply "the Point." This is somewhat surprising, since the depot was clearly the largest employer in Auburn for a number of years and played a major role in Auburn's growth as a city.

Only two significant news articles appeared after the dedication. On August 23, 1944, the *Globe-News* carried an article headed, "Italian Prisoners Employed at Point." The article said that labor shortages had made it necessary to bring in a group of Italian POWs, the 55th QM (Italian) Service Company, consisting of four Italian officers and 215 men, to work at the point. One United States officer and six soldiers supervised the Italians, who were, according to the same article, "housed at the Point in barracks formerly used by employees of a construction company." They received only the normal \$24 per month allotted to all POWs, part in cash, and part in coupons to be redeemed at a post exchange branch from Fort Lewis that was established at the point.

The report went on to state that the Italian POWs were occasionally allowed to leave the point for "sight-seeing and educational tours," but whenever they were off the military reservation they were required to have "securely sewed on the left arm of their shirt and left side of their caps the identifying emblem ITALY." The article closed by assuring the public that the POWs were not there to replace civilian workers, but had been brought in to help with a serious labor shortage.

There are conflicting estimates of the number of people working at the point. The army's accounting of total personnel at all 10 H&R points provides us with at least one reliable snapshot on April 30, 1945:

Officers.....	249
Enlisted Men.....	124
Civilians (direct hire).....	4,052
Contractors' personnel.....	609
Prisoners of War.....	681
Italian Service Units.....	590
TOTAL.....	6,305

The Army Transportation Corps history shows that the Auburn holding and reconsignment point actually handled 574,761 short tons of cargo in 1944 and 242,549 short tons in 1945, below the average for such facilities. (The numbers for Pasco for the same years were 655, 913 and 682,909, respectively.) It seems likely, however, that the Auburn point would have played a key role in the Pacific theater had the war not been cut short by the surrender of Japan after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.

The final newspaper article concerning the Auburn H&R point is related in a way to the Italian POWs. The teamsters' union and other groups apparently protested to the War Department about the use of POW labor, especially after the end of the war. A September 26, 1945, *Globe-News* article read: "Men Needed At Point." It goes on to say that the Italian POWs would no longer be used, and the point was being transformed to an all-civilian personnel force under civil service rules. It notes that the depot employed 575 people at that time, 35 percent of whom were women.

Some Auburn residents remember the H&R point, but few have come forward with any detailed information. Roger Campbell, a retired railroad employee who was a clerk for the Northern Pacific in Auburn at the time, remembers a lot of cargo marked "Government Goods." He also recalls that some of the cargo was carried to port by truck. Two of the main trucking companies involved were Clark Transfer in Auburn and City Transfer in Kent.

Ed Eckes, a railroad employee for 47 years, worked at the Auburn roundhouse in 1942-43, prior to joining the navy for the duration of the war. During that period he occasionally worked as a fireman on switch engines and saw trainloads of tanks destined for Russia sitting in the rail yards. He recalled that the site of the H&R point had been agricultural land belonging to Japanese and white farmers. In addition, Eckes remembered that some Italian internees from merchant ships worked at the roundhouse until 1946 when they all left for home. He heard that at least one came back later. According to Campbell, when the war ended most of the workers were transferred to Ogden, Utah, but some were sent to the H&R point at Pasco.

The Auburn point, or at least a portion of it, still exists as the General Services Administration Depot. The Boeing Company also occupies part of the site, but other industries have been established in the area, so it is no longer easy to find unless you are specifically looking for it. Why did the Auburn Lend-Lease depot fade from memory so quickly and completely? Perhaps the Cold War had something to do with it. Maybe people did not want to discuss their role in providing supplies to the Soviet Union, even though the Soviets were our allies during the war. The activities of the depot surely made a large contribution to the war effort by supplying our allies with vitally needed materiel.

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